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## Section II: *Moving Communities*



Little Saigon, Orange County, California. Photographs by Charles Ku, 2003.

## The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community<sup>1</sup>

Thuy Vo Dang

This paper examines community and identity formation among first-generation Vietnamese Americans in San Diego in relation to discourses and practices around anticommunism. I offer an ethnographic analysis of the community events, programs, and announcements of a first-generation Vietnamese American community organization in San Diego in order to understand how individuals within the organization construct a *cong dong* (community) around the discourse of anticommunism. During the past thirty years, Vietnamese American anticommunism is much more nuanced and complicated and has taken on many different cultural meanings for overseas Vietnamese communities.

During the months before the thirtieth anniversary of the "Fall of Saigon," the Vietnamese Federation of San Diego (hereafter referred to as VFSD)<sup>2</sup> held regular meetings to plan an evening of commemoration and protest for the San Diego Vietnamese American community. "*Thang Tu Den*," or "Black April," remains significant for many overseas Vietnamese as a marker of the loss of and departure from South Vietnam. The organizers of the Black April event strategically deployed this narrative of loss for a variety of reasons: as a pedagogical tool for educating the community (particularly youth) about the history of South Vietnam and the diaspora, as a marker of identity that distin-

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guishes Vietnamese Americans from other ethnic groups in the United States, and as a means of asserting their presence in U.S. society and creating a space in U.S. political life. This event, and many others planned by the VFSD, deployed anticommunism as a political and cultural discourse for community building. I define Vietnamese American anticommunism as an opposition to the current Vietnam government specifically and to communist political ideology in general. Vietnamese American anticommunism also includes an affiliation with U.S. democracy and capitalism. Given that anticommunism has been the dominant discourse in the Vietnamese American community, how is it understood and deployed by first-generation community leaders?

My interviews and observations reveal that anticommunism is not only a political ideology for Vietnamese Americans but a “cultural discourse” that underlies most of the community practices of first-generation-dominated organizations such as the VFSD. The VFSD offers a valuable lens into the workings of first-generation Vietnamese American community organizations as it serves as the umbrella for most of the San Diego Vietnamese American organizations including elders, professionals, sports, youth, and religious groups. Furthermore, it is one of the oldest and the most recognizable representative for the Vietnamese American community, linking local government and community groups together in San Diego. Its leaders have the responsibility of building and maintaining the boundaries of the community while keeping Vietnamese culture alive in diaspora. With such a central role in maintaining culture and identity for Vietnamese Americans, the VFSD offers a productive site for examining the intersection of culture and politics, as well as the homeland and diaspora, through negotiating the cultural politics of anticommunism.

While certain VFSD community events take on a decidedly “political” agenda (such as anticommunist protests against the Vietnam government) and others are generally viewed as “cultural” (such as the Tet festival), the divide between politics and culture does not hold up when we examine how community leaders attempt to use anticommunism as a lynchpin to hold together the diverse Vietnamese American community at multiple sites, from educational and cultural programs to the creative expressions of identity in music and rituals. This paper takes culture as a site “in which politics, culture, and the economic form an inseparable dynamic.”<sup>3</sup> Lisa Lowe suggests that culture opens up a space

for contradictions within the political and economic realms to emerge.<sup>4</sup> Viewing anticommunism as “cultural discourse” thus allows for us to move beyond the easy binary of pro- versus anti-communists to explore the complexities and contradictions within the deployment of this term as a catchall phrase for community building.

Black April serves as one of the cultural sites for the complexities of anticommunism to emerge. In the U.S., the media focuses on Vietnamese Americans during important Black April anniversary events, but does so primarily to reflect on America’s intervention in Vietnam and the consequences of the Vietnam War for the American people. Five years ago, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of this event, national and local news media featured extensive coverage of the Vietnamese American community, re-hashed the debates over the Vietnam War, and yet again attempted to reconcile “Vietnam” and its refugees in the public psyche.<sup>5</sup> The caricature of the Vietnamese American that emerges within these representations is that of an emotionally scarred first-generation male with a strong commitment to “homeland politics,” an anti-communist politics.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this politics is portrayed as sometimes violent, mostly reactionary, and incomprehensible to most outsiders looking in. More recent news coverage of the Vietnamese American community of southern California refers to first-generation Vietnamese as “ghosts of the past” or “sad, aging veterans of a lost war.”<sup>7</sup> This prototype of the Vietnamese expatriate remains part of the dominant discourse in the mainstream media and even popular fiction about Vietnamese Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Vietnamese American anticommunism is represented as a dominant community politics preventing Vietnamese Americans from assimilating into mainstream democracy. The mainstream U.S. media also serves up Vietnamese American anticommunism as evidence of the moral righteousness of the U.S. in the Vietnam War, thus allowing for a re-writing of the Vietnam War as a noble struggle for democratic ideals.<sup>9</sup> This understanding of anticommunism forecloses the possibility of understanding the implications of anticommunism for Vietnamese Americans beyond an assimilationist agenda. What other ways can we understand the work of anticommunism in the Vietnamese diaspora? Indeed, the first generation is aging, but this generation does not consist of “ghosts” but rather of survivors who have suffered tremendous loss and have found strategies for forging a community in complicated ways. In the relatively young Vietnam-

ese American community, the first generation (over the age of fifty) makes up approximately 17 percent of the total population in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> This group has had thirty years to shape community, and their legacy of anticommunism remains a crucial force in community-building, from the South Vietnam national anthem sung at major events to the South Vietnam flag resolutions passed across the country. According to a 2000 *Mercury News* poll of the San Francisco Bay Area's Vietnamese American community, more than two in five of adults over fifty-five and over one in three of adults over forty-five believed that "fighting communism" is a "top priority."<sup>11</sup>

In 2000, journalist Mike Tolson's portrait of the first generation reveals that many feel they have "too much unfinished business" and engage in homeland politics as a coping strategy for living in a difficult present. Tolson interviewed Vietnamese refugees and found that engaging with homeland politics allows for many to imagine themselves as part of a community, offering a sense of belonging to a *dong bao* (literally meaning "the same womb," or "community").<sup>12</sup> Tolson offers the idea of *dong bao* as a way to understand why the war has not ended for so many Vietnamese Americans and why anticommunism continues to be a vital component of their lives. While other scholars have noted the contentious nature of Vietnamese American anticommunist politics, this study offers a different perspective by viewing anticommunism as more than a political expression signaling a relationship to the United States mainstream.<sup>13</sup> I approach anti-communism as a discourse that has worked to shape community and identity in everyday practices and through not only political but cultural and personal spaces. What we have come to recognize as "Vietnamese American anticommunism" cannot be contained within a political realm and is certainly not *only* manifest in political protests, boycotts, and demonstrations. Anticommunism underlies almost all the social, cultural, and educational events that the VFSD organizes, including the largest event of the year, the Tet Festival. Anticommunism also serves as a rationale for why certain nationalist figures are celebrated (such as the Trung Sisters) while others are not (such as figures from the anti-French nationalist movements). While protest and demonstrations are important and highly visible venues for observing how homeland politics shape Vietnamese America, focusing only on these sites forecloses other possibilities for understanding how individuals within Vietnamese America construct community and

identity through the discourse of anticommunism.

First-generation Vietnamese Americans have historically hinged their construction of community upon a vigilant stance against Vietnam's communist regime—a stance that privileges exilic longing and the Fall of Saigon as the original moment of loss. This narrative points a finger at Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese communism as the perpetrators of their losses, as many first-generation Vietnamese Americans adopt an uncritical assessment of the United States' role in the Vietnam War as well as buy into the linear framework of Vietnamese refugees as new (and deserving) model minority. Therefore, while anticommunism may enable an imagined diasporic community through creative means, it has also drawn very distinct lines around that “moral community” in order to align with the U.S. nation-state.<sup>14</sup>

Through analyses of the VFSD's Tet Festival, Flag Resolution, and Black April commemoration in 2004, I will demonstrate how anticommunism constitutes the subtext of these events and programs. I will show how engaging in an anticommunist cultural discourse does not mean that first-generation community leaders are “ghosts of the past,” but rather are actively constructing a diasporic community for the present and future. Anticommunism becomes the vehicle for sustaining an identity and community in the present and serves as pedagogical tool for the younger generations of Vietnamese Americans.

### **Demographic Profile of Vietnamese Americans in San Diego**

San Diego county constitutes the seventh largest Vietnamese American community in the U.S.<sup>15</sup> Vietnamese Americans are the second largest Asian Pacific American group in San Diego County, officially totaling 33,504 in 2000.<sup>16</sup> However, the estimate by many people I interviewed is closer to 40,000. They comprise 14 percent of the total Asian Pacific American population, second only to the Filipino American population whose large numbers can be attributed to the U.S. military presence in San Diego.<sup>17</sup> Like Filipino Americans, the settlement of Vietnamese refugees in San Diego can be understood in relation to the U.S. military. In 1975, faced with the reality of defeat in Vietnam and the need to evacuate South Vietnamese personnel, the U.S. government set up reception centers at four military bases across the country. Marine Corps base Camp Pendleton, located in north San Diego County, was the first of the four centers receiving the first wave



of Vietnamese refugees,<sup>18</sup> consisting of the well educated urban elite of South Vietnam. Almost half of this population consisted of those under the age of seventeen with males slightly outnumbering females by 51 to 49 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Other groups of Vietnamese refugees entering the U.S. in the later 1970s and throughout the 1980s were much more diverse in socioeconomic status, educational background, and ethnicities.<sup>20</sup> In San Diego, the more recent arrivals are found in the City Heights area, close to the ethnic businesses between El Cajon and University Boulevard. Linda Vista was the original “enclave” for the early arrivals, but the more affluent Vietnamese Americans have moved up to Mira Mesa and Rancho Penasquitos.<sup>21</sup> Because of the proximity to Camp Pendleton, many first-wave elites who were affiliated with the South Vietnamese military or U.S. government have resettled in San Diego. Not surprisingly, many Vietnamese American organizations in San Diego have a high number of Vietnamese veterans involved.

Vietnamese Americans are growing in numbers and are becoming more involved in city politics. For example, in the 2004 presidential election, the Department of Justice pressured the San Diego Registrar of Voters office to “voluntarily” implement Vietnamese language voter material for the first time. This effort included hiring Vietnamese speakers to do outreach work for the Registrar’s office. An advisory board, including members of the VFSD, worked with the Registrar’s office to ensure the accuracy and effectiveness of the Vietnamese language material. Besides voting rights, the VFSD has been actively working on the Flag Resolution to acknowledge the yellow-and-red-striped flag of South Vietnam as the legitimate flag of the Vietnamese American community. After much lobbying by the leaders of the VFSD, the City Council passed a resolution on January 13, 2004, formally recognizing the flag of the former Republic of South Vietnam as the symbol of the Vietnamese American community in San Diego. Sixty-six other cities and six states have also passed similar resolutions.<sup>22</sup> These are all examples of the ways in which Vietnamese Americans have been incorporated into local politics and recognized as “deserving” citizens of the nation-state. Part of the reason for the recognition of Vietnamese American achievement falls into a rhetoric of multiculturalism and the construction of Vietnamese Americans as the new model minority—a group that has supposedly overcome difficult economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers to become the immigrant success story for



the public. Given that the nation-state attempts to reconcile the presence of Vietnamese refugees (reminders of an unpopular war) in the public psyche through this narrative in the political sphere, first-generation Vietnamese Americans strategically create a cultural space both to articulate their loss and to validate their existence in the United States through the work of anticommunism. In the process they reveal the contradictions of these dominant narratives.

### **An Insider-Outsider Perspective**

My data comes from participant-observation at meetings and events, announcements and other literature produced by members of the VFSD, and twelve semi-structured interviews with board members. Of the twelve, four are women. Four out of the eight men are veterans of the South Vietnam military. All are highly educated, part of the urban elite of South Vietnam. Ten of the twelve left in 1975, with the other two leaving in the early 1980s. Three have been in the communist reeducation camps.

I became involved with the VFSD in 2002 when I attended a general meeting in order to make contact with Vietnamese veterans in San Diego for a conference paper. I immediately noticed the dominant presence of first-generation males (over forty) at the meeting. These were primarily delegates from member organizations with a handful of independent members attending as well. After speaking to several people and expressing my interest in the organization, I was voted in as an independent delegate. Every first-generation Vietnamese American I have spoken with in the past three years has indicated the need for more youth involvement (some have also mentioned the need for more women in leadership positions) in the VFSD. As a young woman with English skills, I was viewed as an asset to the organization and invited to join the executive board for a two-year term, despite my lack of knowledge about the Vietnamese American community in San Diego. Being the only young woman (and wholly new to the organization) at meetings allowed me to take a more observational role. The VFSD also viewed my membership as an asset because I could help “mainstream” their organization through translating materials into English and helping with press releases for our events to the non-Vietnamese communities.

The VFSD consists of volunteers who are predominantly male professionals. It was founded in 1984 as a mutual assistance association for Vietnamese refugees, and according to one former

president, its main goal is to foster friendship and “fraternity.” In 1994, the VFSD established the first San Diego Refugee Community Center jointly owned with the city of San Diego, which has since served as the headquarters for its operations. The center is unofficially referred to as “*nha cong dong*” (literally translated as “community house”). The VFSD acts as an umbrella organization to thirty-eight smaller groups including various youth, veterans, religious, elders, medical, and professional associations. The express mission is to promote Vietnamese culture and heritage to San Diego. The most important annual events include the Tet Festival and Black April commemoration. Aside from these two cultural events, the VFSD also organizes the Mid-Autumn festival, Hung Kings anniversary, Trung Sisters anniversary, health fairs, and fundraising events, and participates in local fairs and parades.

The VFSD weekly board meetings revolve around preparing for upcoming events. The meetings, scheduled one day a week during the evening because most of the board members work full-time, are semi-structured with business discussions first, then casual conversation and dinner provided by the president after.<sup>23</sup> The meetings run from two to three hours long because members spend quite a bit of time debating or having side conversations. While I used to think the meetings are too long, I have grown to appreciate and regard the tangential conversations as instructive to how social relationships are forged among community organizers—one of the key reasons people continue to do community work. These meetings are thus more than for planning events; they foster a sense of community in and of themselves, a space where the bonds between Vietnamese Americans are nurtured, contested, and ultimately strengthened for the participating individuals. I have grown to view the members of the VFSD as a new type of family. When in a meeting and sharing a joke, conversation, or food with the members, I am reminded of why I came to this project in the first place—they have become a new sort of family for me, and I strive to understand and represent their lives in a way that is multidimensional.

There are no easy strategies for managing a split subjectivity when turning one’s research gaze on a community and on a familiar organization. Linda Trinh Vo ponders the implications of “third-world scholars from first-world academic institutions studying third-world communities in the first-world.”<sup>24</sup> In this instance, the demarcation between insider and outsider is blurred,

as is the line between one's personal and academic agenda. I began my work with the VFSD long before I decided to embark on this project, but once I turned my research onto the organization of which I had been a part for two years, I felt somewhat schizophrenic. For example, during a meeting to plan a protest against a Vietnamese ambassador speaking at UC San Diego, I was asked to point out parking and restrooms on the campus map because of my familiarity with the campus. (The protest actually occurred just a few feet from my office space at UCSD.) I excused myself from attending the protest, but I continued to feel uneasy about my dual-role as a researcher critically examining the discourse of anticommunism and a leader in an anticommunist organization. I chose the easiest way out of my roles by not attending. But I could not go in good conscience to watch from the sidelines as a VFSD member, and I could not go to protest a talk that I would have probably attended. Negotiating the tension between my dual-role as organization member and researcher requires a constant reassessment of my responsibility to the organization, the community, and to my project. I still struggle with this tension, but it has forced me to think of my work as having a mixed audience—my colleagues in academia and my colleagues in the community.

**“We need to find a place to stand”:  
The Flag Resolution and Tet Festival**

One first-generation Vietnamese American community leader expressed the desire to find a place to stand, or a place of belonging, for “our people”: *“Minh phai tim mot cho dung o day.”*<sup>25</sup> In order to find that place of belonging, he insisted that it is necessary to find an outlet for representation and education—both aimed at mainstream America and the younger generations of Vietnamese America. A common theme I found in my interviews is the belief by first-generation community leaders that the “South Vietnamese story” is either distorted or not at all represented by mainstream channels of information, including library archives and media outlets. The “South Vietnamese story” is about the struggle for democracy and the suffering of many at the hands of the communist victors both during and after the war. It also includes an emphasis on the reasons why people fled Vietnam just prior to or after the Fall of Saigon. That these stories are erased or inaccurately represented for many presents a crisis for second-generation Vietnamese Americans who do not know South

Vietnam and most likely never experienced Vietnamese communism first-hand. Nine out of twelve of my interviewees emphasize the need to challenge the “communist” perspective that South Vietnamese are losers or puppets of the U.S. government. Here, “communism” is used as shorthand to describe the erasure of South Vietnamese history in the U.S. mainstream. A “communist” perspective threatens to obliterate the significance of Vietnamese American losses and fails to acknowledge the reason Vietnamese Americans are displaced. Therefore, anticommunism has been used as a strategy to counter this erasure. However, even as first-generation Vietnamese Americans challenge the erasure of the South Vietnamese story, they do not critique the U.S. for this erasure. In attempting to find a place of belonging and representation to counter these debilitating images, community leaders assert a singular narrative of community and identity—one South Vietnamese story—that defines the Fall of Saigon as the original moment of loss, thereby placing the entire blame on Vietnamese communists.

As a relatively recent endeavor, the Flag Resolution campaign aimed at city, county, and state municipalities to recognize the former South Vietnam flag serves as a means of claiming a representational space for the Vietnamese American community. Flags play an important role in representing a national community, and for a people whose nation no longer exists, the flag becomes a powerful symbol bearing a heavy burden of history. The South Vietnam flag must tell a “South Vietnamese story.” As mentioned above, altogether seventy-three resolutions have been passed recognizing the “Freedom and Heritage Flag” as the symbol of Vietnamese Americans.<sup>26</sup> In February 2003, Westminster, California, unofficially the cultural capital of the overseas Vietnamese, passed the first resolution. (Currently VFSD leaders are working with other community groups in Orange County and northern California to lobby for a California statewide resolution.) On January 13, 2004, Mayor Dick Murphy and the City Council of San Diego passed the resolution recognizing the yellow-and-red-striped flag as the symbol “of resilience, freedom, nationalism, and democracy” for the Vietnamese American community.<sup>27</sup> The Flag Resolution does not change the status of Vietnam-U.S. relations, but it is considered a symbolic victory by the community leaders with whom I spoke. According to the terminology of the resolution, the “Freedom and Heritage Flag” is entirely compatible with American ideals of “resilience, freedom,

nationalism, and democracy”; therefore, acknowledging the flag would not only appease a large number of Vietnamese American constituents but also reaffirm the ideals of the nation-state. However, referring to the flag as not only a symbol of “freedom” but also one of “heritage” suggests that the political quest for freedom is coupled with a drive to sustain Vietnamese heritage and culture in diaspora.

In an interview with a first-generation Vietnamese American community leader in his early fifties, I asked why the flag resolution is an important project to pursue. He answered:

All the people who left Vietnam because you are looking for freedom. . . . The flag resolution represents you are not a communist. . . . You are a person who got out of Vietnam because you don’t want to live with communists, so you got no reason to respect the communist flag, so you have to keep the old flag to represent the freedom of the Vietnamese. I left Vietnam and I cannot respect the communist flag at all because they’re not my flag. . . .they’re not my flag.<sup>28</sup>

Another community leader describes this political measure as having a “psychological effect” on the Vietnamese American community because “the people that fought under that flag can be proud that the flag is recognized as the symbol of our community.”<sup>29</sup> This struggle over symbols is also a contest of memory because the flag is one of the most visible “technologies of memory” for Vietnamese Americans wishing to tell their version of Vietnam’s contentious history.<sup>30</sup> In her important formulation about the work of memory in relationship to official historical discourse, Marita Sturken suggests, “Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”<sup>31</sup> Viewing the flag as a technology of Vietnamese American cultural memory allows for us to move beyond the question of “truth” and righteousness and refocuses the discussion on what political purpose the particular memories serve in the present.

If the South Vietnam flag and the flag resolution work as “psychological” tools for first-generation Vietnamese Americans to fortify the boundaries of community and identity against Vietnamese communism, what are the implications of inserting “homeland politics” into mainstream political spheres? By using the language of democracy in lobbying for the flag resolution, first-gen-

eration Vietnamese Americans assert a version of South Vietnam history into U.S. politics, forcing (Vietnamese) Americans to consider the implications of South Vietnamese memories, stories, and bodies on U.S. soil. The “Freedom and Heritage Flag(s)” flying in San Diego and other parts of the U.S. signal that more than one Vietnam exists and further serve as a counter-story to “official” historical discourse about the Vietnam War. That South Vietnam continues to exist in the diaspora makes it impossible to dismiss the unruliness of the war and its continuing effects on (Vietnamese) Americans.

A week after the resolution passed, the VFSD held a ceremony to accept this resolution from the Mayor’s office at the 2004 Tet Festival.<sup>32</sup> This event shows the overlap of political and cultural spaces. VFSD board members describe the event as a “cultural celebration,” but the performance of nationalism and the deployment of the flag at the festival site show how a cultural site can be highly politicized. The performances at the festival also demonstrate how politics takes on a decidedly “cultural” form as performers select songs that are in line with the anticommunist sensibilities of the community. In 2004, anticommunism is more than an undertone; it set the theme for the festival. Rows of yellow-and-red-striped flags of every size adorned the festival grounds. As guests entered the front gate, they were given South Vietnam and U.S. paper flags to wave during the opening ceremony and to keep as souvenirs. Coupling the South Vietnam flag with the U.S. flag allowed for Vietnamese Americans to elevate South Vietnam to a parallel nation-status.<sup>33</sup> The first part of the opening ceremony for any VFSD cultural event includes singing the South Vietnam national anthem as well as an observance of a moment of silence for those who have lost their lives during the Vietnam War and during the years after in the “pursuit of freedom.” While the sentiments evoked during the singing of the national anthem are elation and pride, the moment of silence is somber and usually dramatized by melancholic music. Both the singing and the silence bear a heavy burden of history, but of a history that is not represented, according to the first-generation Vietnamese Americans I interviewed. In these symbolic acts of memory, Vietnamese Americans open up a space to mourn their losses and assert their presence in the U.S.

During the opening ceremony, a large South Vietnam flag was carried to the stage by Vietnamese Americans of first, 1.5, and second generations—community leaders, veterans, students, men

and women—in a ritualistic demonstration of nationalism. While the resolution was being handed over from the mayor’s representative to the VFSD president, the crowd applauded and cheered, waving their miniature flags.<sup>34</sup> Some had tears in their eyes, others were cheerful and jubilant, still others were somber. In this performance of nationalism via anticommunism, the audience is equally important to the process of collectively imagining a community. Despite what the VFSD organizers may have intended, the flag takes on different meanings for individuals present. While some in the audience have personal enmity with the Hanoi regime, many others do not know what Vietnamese communism is; thus while the flag is meant to be an anticommunist symbol, it can also represent one’s “heritage.” Moreover, the vibrant display of the flag calls into question the existence of two Vietnams. While the Vietnamese American community has been narrowly defined as a “communist-free zone” of sorts, even those who are not self-proclaimed anticommunists are also drawn into this imagined community through the spectacle of memory and the desire for a “place to stand.” I find myself touched by the anthem and the silence each time as I imagine a South Vietnam beyond my own grasp. This moment opens up a space for Vietnamese Americans to express their exilic longing for South Vietnam, but it also adds a different layer of meaning to the cultural work of anticommunism. Anticommunism is as much about carving out a space in the U.S. and bearing witness to a history that cannot be erased by mainstream America. The anthem and the silence work as a form of emotive bonding and a performative assertion of respect to the dead, but more importantly as pedagogical tools for claiming a diasporic space in which first-generation Vietnamese Americans can teach the younger generation about South Vietnamese/American history. Moreover, this cultural space where identity and community are performed reveals the fissures and contradictions in Vietnamese/American politics. The prevailing presence of South Vietnam in the U.S. signals the competing histories over the Vietnam War and suggests that “Vietnam” cannot be contained within history books but is alive and speaking back in the present.

**Black April: “The problem between me and Hanoi is still there”**

If an occasion such as the Tet festival allows for the momentary imagining of community for many diasporic Vietnam-



ese, what is the purpose of commemorative events such as Black April? While anticommunism underlies the ritualistic singing of the national anthem and the moment of silence during Tet, it is much more apparent in the commemoration of the loss of South Vietnam during the Black April event. Black April is much smaller in scale than the Tet festival, and it usually does not draw non-Vietnamese guests. This event is much more about working through the internal politics of the community for the member organizations than about performing an identity and claiming a representational space in the U.S. While the flag ceremony during the Tet festival shows the public face of a "united" Vietnamese American community around a shared history (for the purpose of a mixed audience), the display of the flag during Black April does not have the same jubilant quality, and it also reveals how the negotiations over community politics lie behind the public display of anticommunist unity. For example, the veterans' organizations generally play a key role in organizing the event and are particularly vigilant about how the flag should be hung, how the banners should be worded, and what speeches are acceptable. In policing the boundaries of this event so vigorously, the organizers claim authority over a righteous narrative about South Vietnam that demands protection.

During the planning meetings for the 2004 Black April event, the Vietnamese Student Associations from UC San Diego and San Diego State took the helm, and the elders followed closely behind to monitor their decisions and activities. The student organizations took the initiative in planning and came before the VFSD with a proposal for a month-long commemorative project that met with approval from all the members present. While student groups have been involved every year, this was the first year in which they had the most control. During one particularly lively meeting, a disagreement between the youth and elders erupted over which terminology to use for the banner. The elders wanted to use "*Ngay Quoc Han*" (Day of National Resentment) while the youth preferred "*Ngay Tuong Niem*" (Day of Commemoration). Elders at the meeting argued that remembering does not make enough of a political statement about their opposition to Vietnam's communist regime. Furthermore, commemoration connotes something that is past, dead, or over, whereas for many of the first-generation organizers, the "war" continues symbolically in the cultural and political work in the community and is evident in the terms they use for organizing. For example, "*dau tranh*" (wage/

fight war) is often used by community leaders when describing the pedagogical work they must do for the community.

In the debate, the youth countered by insisting that “commemoration” takes the political edge off of the event and perhaps allows the second generation to feel more comfortable with participating in the event. In the end, the youth prevailed because many of the first generation present wanted to encourage youth involvement in the community. However, during the event, I noticed both banners were put up. Black April thus represented both the elders’ move to retain a vigilant anticommunist politics, or the control of narratives about South Vietnam, and the youth’s temperance of that stance with their own “commemorative” efforts. This does not mean that the second generation participating were not anticommunists. In fact, those who came onstage to speak evoked histories of communist atrocities to complement the veteran speakers’ testimonials, mainly by speaking about their parents’/family’s experience with communism. The second-generation students also put together a slideshow condemning the Vietnamese government for the exploitation of Vietnamese children in the sex tourism industry and thanked the United States for accepting Vietnamese refugees. This narrative moves Vietnamese American concerns into a present context: protest against continuing human rights violations in Vietnam and a reassurance that they in fact belong here in America. This event demonstrates the continuity of anticommunism in the second generation, even if it has taken on a tempered form. Moreover, the “anticommunism” expressed at this event is directly aimed at the Vietnam government, viewed by many overseas Vietnamese as the reason for their exile. Many of my interviewees (as well as other community leaders with whom I spoke) articulated their protest specifically against Vietnam’s “corrupt” regime which they blame for human trafficking and other human rights violations. Thus, communist ideology was not specifically under protest, but rather the protest was directed at the practice of communism by Vietnam. While only two of my interviewees took up the task of explaining the failings of communist ideology, the majority explained their anticommunist sentiment as aimed specifically at Vietnam’s government. The meanings of anticommunism also varied for those participating in Black April. In the dialogue between elders and youth in the meetings leading up to the Black April event, I noticed how the elders seemed suspicious of the youth’s knowledge of South Vietnamese history. Thus, the strug-

gle over authority and the right to claim South Vietnam is a privilege that many first-generation Vietnamese Americans regard as bearing much obligation and responsibility—not unlike my own experience with doing research in this community.

Black April seems to be an event organized around the logic of anticommunism and protest against the Hanoi regime, but from the perspective of a participant, the event can signify a space of mourning for the Vietnamese dead. If the dominant narrative in the U.S. about the Vietnam War centers American lives and American deaths, and the dominant narrative in Vietnam about April 30, 1975 is about victory and liberation, then where can Vietnamese Americans mourn their losses? Black April serves that symbolic purpose, but it also becomes a pedagogical tool for the community's youth about Vietnamese American history, a version which defines the Vietnamese American community always in opposition to Vietnamese communists. Are there other ways of narrating this history so that we may emerge with a different definition of community, one that does not depend upon a binary categorization of us versus them?

The tensions of that binary construction of community have been evoked by some of my interviewees. Part of the reason that Black April continues to be an important commemorative event, one interviewee told me, is because the elders need to make a bold declaration that they are still here, even if they have been forced to flee their homeland. A Vietnamese American woman in her mid-fifties explained how many first-generation Vietnamese Americans wish to return to their homeland someday and revealed the sentiment of being caught in a no-place:

*That su nhung nguoi Viet Nam dau co muon la chon lua di sang day sinh song dau. Tai vi bat buot thoi. Minh la nguoi ty nan cong san, minh chay tron cong san thi. . .minh chay tron che do chu minh dau phai chay bo dat nuoc minh dau. Khi nao minh cung muon tro ve dat nuoc Viet Nam cua minh chu. Luc do, minh tuong tuong khong con che do cong san nua thi nhat dinh ai cung tro ve ca, nhat la the he co, nguoi nao cung ve het. Du co the cuoc song no kho hon chuc, nhung ma ai cung thich ve het tron. . .Minh khong co the nao hoan toan hoi nhap lam nguoi My duoc het do. . .Ngay ca sinh hoat, sinh song, roi an uon, su su voi nhau, khong the nao thanh nguoi My duoc het. Nhat la ve tieng noi. . .<sup>35</sup>*

Honestly, Vietnamese did not want to, or choose to come over here to live. It's because they were forced. We are refugees of communism, we ran away from the communists, we did not

run away from our country. We always want to return to our country. When the communist regime is no longer there, all of us would return, especially my generation, we would all return. Even if life might be more difficult, we would all like to return. . . We can never fully integrate to become Americans. . . In regards to our activities, our way of life, our food, our behavior towards each other, we cannot become Americans completely. Especially in regards to language. . .

While this interviewee described herself as anticommunist, she had a hard time explaining to me what a communist is. In fact, each time I probed about anticommunism, she turned to a discussion about cultural practices such as retaining Vietnamese language and finding a way to teach the younger generation about Vietnam so that they will care enough to return to help improve the country's economic well-being. Her desire to return to Vietnam is not a new concept in writings about Vietnamese Americans as exiles. Coupled with her assessment that the first generation cannot become Americans in any of their cultural practices, the desire to return is underwritten with an anxiety about their uneasy place in American society.

Another interviewee described his life in the U.S. and why he strongly opposes Vietnam's current government:

When I first came here, I realize the kind of life I have is dual-faced, meaning part of, half of, me trying to survive here and then integrate into the mainstream. The other half, I still look back at Vietnam. But for me politically I am very clear. I've never been back to Vietnam, number one, even though I love to go back to visit my birthplace and Hanoi I left when I was six years old. I still remember Vinh Ha Long very vividly in my mind. That's why when I left with my parents and I saw Vinh Ha Long at that time, that's the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my life and mind you, I've been seeing many other places in the world—New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore. . . So, it's not because I'm Vietnamese I am saying that part of my native country is beautiful. But I think I have an unbiased comparison. Even though the U.S. terminated its trade embargo somewhere in 1992 I believe and 1994 they exchanged ambassadors, so the two countries have been normalized. For me, the problem between me and Hanoi is still there, still valid. That's one of the reasons I haven't been back even though I'd love to be back. Hopefully, I could do that before I die. That's my. . . dream, if you will, my resolution, whatever you want to call it.<sup>36</sup>

The longing this particular first-generation Vietnamese American man has for Vietnam is clear from his memories of Hanoi and Vinh Ha Long. But his “problem” with Hanoi continues to pose a barrier between his “beautiful” homeland and his existence in the U.S., causing him to live a life that is “dual-faced.” While eight out of my twelve interviewees have returned for one reason or other, they all profess the inability to live in Vietnam under communism. Thus, during Black April, the distance between the homeland and the diaspora is temporarily bridged as Vietnamese Americans come together to protest “communist atrocities” and remember a homeland that once was. Gathering around the South Vietnam and U.S. flags, together with many other Vietnamese Americans, Black April participants can imagine themselves as part of a community and struggle with the pain of loss together. The candlelight march and the crowd (as well as the entertainment onstage) offer a space for Vietnamese Americans to socialize. As I roamed the grounds, I greeted elders I knew from previous events, and I overheard side conversations among old friends and new acquaintances. Black April is as much about the human connections as it is about the political statements being made at the podium. Not all participants will have a “problem” with Hanoi as my interviewee does necessarily; however, the ritual of commemoration may open up the space for some first-generation Vietnamese Americans to negotiate their subjectivities under two flags—South Vietnam and the U.S.—with all their contradictions and complexities.

## **Conclusion**

VFSD’s events and programs offer a different way to understand how anticommunism as cultural discourse has structured the Vietnamese American community in San Diego. More importantly, anticommunism has many faces and multiple meanings. It does not strictly mean an opposition to communist ideology nor does it strictly mean a specific opposition to communist Vietnam. Anticommunism has taken on other important meanings for those who engage in its discourses and practices so that it becomes necessary to understand Vietnamese American anticommunism as a cultural politics. Through the voices of my interviewees, the narrative of loss is complicated by the desire to find a “place to stand” and a way to move forward with memories and stories with which they can live. Contrary to mainstream representations, first-generation Vietnamese Americans are not forever bounded

to an immutable past, but rather are actively deploying anticommunism as a signifier for “freedom and heritage” and as a pedagogical tool for the second generation. Their “South Vietnamese story” has often been dismissed as emotional or overly moral, and while I see the need to re-conceptualize community along less rigid terms than provided by this narrative thus far, I believe that by thinking of anticommunism as a cultural discourse, we have a way of critically reading some of the community practices that have been taken for granted.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Yen Le Espiritu for her insightful comments as well as her support, friendship, and guidance during the research and writing process. I thank UCSD California Cultures in Comparative Perspective for giving me the 2004 Summer Fellowship which allowed me to conduct many of the interviews used in this paper. I have been so fortunate to learn from a group of strong, intelligent and compassionate Vietnamese American women during the 2004-2005 academic year, my reading group “Toi Dau Hay Toi Do.” This paper is dedicated to all of them.
2. The Vietnamese Federation of San Diego, or Hiep Hoi Nguoi Viet San Diego, is a non-profit 501c(3) organization serving as an umbrella for thirty-eight other local Vietnamese American organizations in San Diego, including various professional societies, veterans, elders, youth, and sports groups. The committees and advisory boards are mainly made up of first-generation Vietnamese Americans.
3. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, “Introduction,” in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.
4. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
5. In a sample of news articles taken from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* between April and June 2000, I found a range of articles dealing with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, U.S. veterans and their responses, Vietnam War films and other cultural production, surveys and features of Vietnamese American communities across the U.S. addressing their political views, economic achievements, and responses to “Black April,” op-ed pieces on the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the conditions of contemporary Vietnamese economy and society.
6. See, for example, Scott Martelle and Mai Tran, “Protestors Urge Boycott of Vietnamese Media,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2000; Philip P. Pan and Phuong Ly, “3 Roads from Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2000; Mike Tolson, “Exiles Carry Old Hopes in New Light,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 28, 2000.

7. Seth Mydans, "Journeys: A Fallen Saigon Rises Again in the West," *New York Times*, April 5, 2002. <http://travel2.nytimes.com/mem/travel/articlepage.html?res=9C0CE4DA1F3AF936A35757C0A9649C8B63>
8. Vietnamese American popular fiction such as Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) portray first-generation Vietnamese Americans as a passive and obedient model minority who continue to suffer from the haunting presence of the Vietnam War. Newspaper articles focusing on the Vietnamese American community, particularly in areas with a high concentration of Vietnamese Americans, emphasize the protests and demonstrations of Vietnamese Americans against Vietnam and Vietnamese communism.
9. For an critical reading of U.S. mainstream media representations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, see Yen Le Espiritu, "The War, the Warriors, and the Refugees: U.S. Press Coverage of the 25th Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" working paper, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2005.
10. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.
11. Christian Collet and Nadine Selden, "Separate Ways. . . Worlds Apart? The 'Generation Gap' in Vietnamese America as Seen through the *San Jose Mercury News* Poll," *Amerasia Journal* 29:1 (2003), 199-217.
12. Tolson.
13. See Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "Creating Ethnic Places: Vietnamese American Community Building in Orange County and Boston," Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2000; and Nhu-Ngoc T. Ong and David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Incorporation: Vietnamese American Protests, 1975-2001," Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine, 2004. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/csd.04-08>
14. I borrow the phrase "moral community" from Guillermo J. Grenier and Lisandro Perez, who argue that the Cuban community in Miami shows the persistence of an "exile ideology" which is dependent on the construction of a "'moral community' that serves to build political capital and a sense of solidarity in the enclave." See *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 87.
15. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census report. The seven areas in the U.S. with the highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans are: (1) Los Angeles-Riverside-Orange County, CA—233,573; (2) San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA—146,613; (3) Houston-Galveston-Brazoria, TX—63,924; (4) Dallas-Forth Worth, TX—47,090; (5) Washington, D.C./VA/MD—43,709; (6) Seattle-Tacoma-Bremerton, WA—40,001 (7) San Diego, CA—33,504.
16. U.S. Census Bureau.
17. Yen Le Espiritu and Diana Wolf, "The Paradox of Assimilation:



- Children of Filipino Immigrants in San Diego," Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, eds., *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 157-186.
18. See Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans* (Connecticut: Greenview Press, 1999); Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977); and Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979)
  19. Montero, 22.
  20. From the late 1970s through the 1980s (and continuing in a lesser degree today), refugees and immigrants from Vietnam include the ethnic Chinese; many are less educated than the first-wave cohort from varying educational and class backgrounds. Many came through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) and the Humanitarian Operations (HO) program to settle in already established locations such as Little Saigon in Westminster, California.
  21. Min Zhou, "Straddling Different Worlds: The Acculturation of Vietnamese Refugee Children," in Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, eds., *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 187-227.
  22. See <http://www.fva.org/vnflag/> for a complete listing. The Vietnamese-American Public Affairs Committee (VPAC) has a FAQ section on their website explaining why Vietnamese Americans are pushing for this flag resolution, <http://www.vpac-usa.org/>
  23. The current VFSD president always brings dinner for the staff, usually prepared by his wife. The two once owned a restaurant in San Diego.
  24. Linda Trinh Vo, "Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider-versus-Outsider Perspective" in Martin F. Manalansan IV, ed., *Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 17-37.
  25. The quoted phrase directly translates to "We need to find a place to stand here."
  26. The VFSD's annual new year publication had a long story detailing the history of the South Vietnam flag and refers to it as the "Freedom and Heritage Flag" or the "yellow flag with three-red stripes." "Giai Pham Xuan Ky Mau—Hiep Hoi Nguoi Viet San Diego," San Diego, January 2004.
  27. Quoted from the resolution signed by the mayor and the San Diego City Council members.
  28. Interview conducted in San Diego on March 2, 2005.
  29. Interview conducted in San Diego on December 13, 2004.
  30. I borrow this phrase from Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

31. *Ibid.*, 9.
32. The Tet (New Year) Festival in San Diego has been organized by the VFSD for nearly twenty years and usually draws a large crowd, estimated at around 10,000 people by the VFSD.
33. During a community meeting in March 2005 at the San Diego Police Department's multicultural storefront in City Heights, the VFSD president discussed the upcoming Black April event, and first-generation community members joined in a lively discussion about the South Vietnam flag. One man lamented the low numbers of flags on display since the resolution passed one year before. Another man asked if they always needed to put up the U.S. flag alongside the South Vietnam one and was told by the VFSD president they should always do so out of respect.
34. Besides the usual Vietnamese American crowd, there were also many non-Vietnamese city officials present who also waved the two flags and stand as witnesses to the vibrant presence of South Vietnam in San Diego.
35. Interview conducted in San Diego on March 9, 2005.
36. Interview conducted in San Diego on December 10, 2004.